

# Is Islam an Obstacle to Democratization in the Muslim World? The Debate of the Compatibility of Islam and Democracy Revisited

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to make a critical presentation of the arguments about the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and discuss whether or not Islam is an obstacle to reach institutionalized democracies in the Muslim world. Firstly, the arguments of those who think that Islam and democracy are incompatible are presented. Then, the empirical and theoretical arguments that indicate that Islam and democracy are compatible are put forward. In the Conclusion, as pointed out by the empirical and theoretical arguments, it is emphasized that Islam is not an obstacle in establishing democracy in the Muslim world. However, the attention is also drawn to the fact that this compatibility alone is not enough for democracy to emerge and institutionalize. In this regard, it is argued that what must be done is both to strengthen the interpretation of Islam, which argues for the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and to make an effort in the direction of eliminating the obstacles to democracy in socio-economic, institutional and international realms.

**Key Words:** Islam, democracy, liberal Islam, socio-economic development, culture

## Introduction\*\*

In a 1996 article, Bernard Lewis (53-54) comments that of the 53 member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), only Turkey can pass Huntington's criterion of democracy. This criterion states that a country is democratic when it has made two consecutive, peaceful changes of government via free elections. And he adds that even Turkey's democracy is in many ways a troubled one.

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In a more recent study that examines the findings of the 2001 Freedom House Survey, Adrian Karatnycky (2002: 103) indicates that, “*the democracy gap between the Islamic countries and the rest of the world is dramatic. In the 47 countries with an Islamic majority, only 11 (23 percent) have democratically elected governments, while 110 of the 145 non-Islamic states (76 percent) are electoral democracies.*” Since the publication of these two articles—in 1996 and 2002, respectively—not much has changed in the Islamic world. To be fair, we must mention some of the recent developments such as Saudi Arabia’s experiment with democracy at the local level, Iraq’s parliamentary elections in January 2005 and constitutional referendum in October 2005, and President Hosni Mubarak’s reelection in a multi-candidate presidential election in September 2005. Although these are welcomed developments in the direction of democracy, they are not enough yet to qualify these countries as democratic even by Huntington’s rather modest “criterion”.

This state of the affairs with respect to the development of democracy in the Muslim world makes one ask if the root cause of the problem is “Islam” itself. At a time when the single superpower of the world embarked upon establishing democracies by force in Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible with one another gains vital importance. The answer to this question also has very important implications for the Turkic states of central Asia such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and others. With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, it had been hoped that these states would join the third wave of democratization that had started in 1974 according to Samuel P. Huntington (1993). However, to this day, this hope has not been fulfilled.

There may be several reasons behind this failure, such as the legacy of communism, the low level of social and economic development, and cultural factors, in which Islam has a significant place. However, the fact that the European satellites of Soviet Union made successful transitions to democracy after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc lessens the significance of totalitarian legacy as a factor in explaining the lack of democracy in the Turkic states of central Asia. On the other hand, with regards to social and economic development, although it cannot be dismissed as an important factor in explaining the lack of democracy among the Turkic states, again the fact that there are democratic countries, such as India, that have similar economic conditions to these states reduces the explanatory power of this variable. Also, material conditions of a country can change in time for the better, easing the transition to and consolidation of democracy-if they are the obstacle to democratization. However, the religion of a country, which has an important place in shaping its culture, cannot be changed so easily.

Of course, the religion is also subject to interpretation, and change in a sense. But, the core of the religion- the Koran and the *hadith* in the case of Islam- is not subject to change. Therefore, if the core of Islam is not compatible with democracy, then Islam may be one of the most important factors that explain the lack of democracy in the Turkic states of central Asia as well.

As a matter of fact, within the Islamic tradition there are scholars such as Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Maududi (1903-79) from the Indian subcontinent and Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) from Egypt, who think that Islam is irreconcilable with the main assumptions of democratic government, and therefore, Islam and democracy are incompatible. If this pessimistic approach with regards to the compatibility of Islam and democracy is right, then the supporters of democracy in the Muslim world are struggling in vain. However, against this pessimistic view, it is possible to put forward both empirical evidence and theoretical arguments that support the view that Islam and democracy are compatible. Accordingly, there are also those who believe that Islam and democracy are not only compatible but also their association is inevitable within the Islamic world. The examples of this optimistic view about the compatibility between Islam and democracy are Abdul Karim Soroush, a Shi'ite Muslim and a Persian from Iran and Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannaouchi, a Sunni Muslim and a Tunisian Arab.

Against this background the purpose of this article becomes clear: To give a critical overview of the arguments about the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and to see if Islam stands as an obstacle in the way of having institutionalized democracies in the Muslim world.

### **Islam and Democracy: An Impossible Association?**

The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of a number of Muslim scholars who rejected democracy in favor of Islamic models such as the model of *shura* (consultation). Among those scholars come Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Maududi (1903-79) from the Indian subcontinent and Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) from Egypt. The basic argument of these scholars is that with its notion of popular sovereignty, democracy clashes with the Islamic notion of the sovereignty of God (Tripp 1994: 162; El-Affendi 2003: 37)<sup>1</sup>. As Maududi (1985) puts it, "*Islam has no trace of Western democracy. . . . Islam, . . . , altogether repudiates the philosophy of popular sovereignty and rears its polity on the foundations of the sovereignty of God and the vicegerency (khilafah) of man*" (Maududi 1985: 21). Similarly, Qutb (1988) states that "[s]etting up the kingdom of God on earth, and eliminating the kingdom of man, means taking power from the hands of its usurpers and restoring it to God alone . . . and [establishing] the supremacy of the Shari'a alone and the repeal of all man-made laws." (in Tripp 1994: 171)

From the liberal democratic perspective, the rules of a political system are legitimate only because they are enacted either by the people themselves or by their representatives to whom they granted their consent. Hence, freedom is not infringed by the necessity of political obligation. On the other hand, it is argued that in Islam, sovereignty belongs to God and individuals obey the rules of the political system not because they gave their consent to them but because God ordered it. As Hamdi (1996: 84) points out, “...no Islamic state can be legitimate in the eyes of its subjects without obeying the main teachings of the shari’a. A secular government might coerce obedience, but Muslims will not abandon their belief that state affairs should be supervised by the just teachings of the holy law.” According to this understanding, in addition to providing the norms of individual behavior, *shari’a* presents the sole source of law that binds both the individual faithful and the sovereign (Roy 1996: 13). On this basis, Qutb believes that the authority of the ruler does not derive from the consent of the people, but from the fact that he enforces the divine commands of the God. Should he fail in this respect, the Muslim community has a right to depose him (Tripp 1994: 168). In Qutb’s (1953: 94) words,

*The ruler in Islamic law is not to be obeyed because of his own person; he is to be obeyed only by virtue of holding his position through the law of Allah and his Messenger; his right to obedience is derived from his observance of that law, and from no other thing. If he departs from the law, he is no longer entitled to obedience, and his orders need no longer be obeyed.*

In addition to their rejection of the concept of popular sovereignty of democracy, these scholars also share an attitude of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism. As Roy (1996: 4) indicates, this attitude today has assumed the form of anti-Westernism. For these scholars, “Islam is the divinely mandated alternative to the materialism and secularism of Western capitalism and communism” (Esposito 1998: 317). While rejecting political, economic and social arrangements, and mores of the West, this anti-Western outlook recognizes the scientific and technological advances in the west and, sees no contradiction in appropriating them. Thus, Qutb (1953: 251) states that “[i]n the case of pure sciences and their applied results of all kinds, we must not hesitate to utilize all things in the sphere of material life; our use of them should be unhampered and unconditional, unhesitating and unimpeded.”

This line of thought can be depicted as Islamist view or ideology. As Nasr (2005: 16) argues, “Islamist ideology . . . calls for the creation of an utopian Islamic state that notionally vests all sovereignty in God. This call is based on a narrow interpretation of Islamic law, and promotes an illiberal, authoritarian politics that leaves little room for civil liberties,

cultural pluralism, the rights of women and minorities, and democracy.” In this understanding, there is no room for personal choice and its political equivalent in the political sphere, i.e. democracy: “In [Islamic] state no one can regard any field of his affairs as personal and private” (Maududi 1985: 30). As Qutb (1988) puts it, “[I]f it is asked ‘Should not the interest of individuals shape their existence?’, then we must refer once again to the question and answer at the heart of Islam: ‘Do you know or does God know?’ ‘God knows and you do not know’ ” (in Tripp 1994: 169). In this sense, Islamism is seen as a comprehensive ideology, and the state, which is based on this ideology, covers every aspect of life (Qutb 1953: 8; Maududi 1985: 30). To the extent that Islamist scholars such as Maududi and Qutb extinguish the division between the public and private and makes personal subordinate to the common, Islamism can even be seen as a form of totalitarianism<sup>2</sup> (Esposito 1998: 153).

Sanford Lakoff (2004: 136) states that “[t]he general bias of Muslim thinking . . . is in principle against the individualism, pluralism, and secularism characteristic of modern democracies.” Thus, he believes that Islamist line of thought is dominant in the Muslim world. As a result, one may be tempted to conclude that Islam does not provide democracy with a fertile ground on which it can grow. However, this pessimistic view about the compatibility of Islam and democracy does not go unchallenged. There are both theoretical and empirical arguments that can be extended against it. Let’s begin with the theoretical ones.

### **Some Theoretical Arguments in Favor of The Compatibility of Islam And Democracy**

In the theoretical front, we can take Binder’s (1988: 243-244) distinction between the two sorts of *Islamic liberalism* or *liberal Islam* as our starting point. According to both of these interpretations, although for different reasons, Islam and democracy are compatible. For the first branch of Islamic liberalism, it is possible to have a democratic political system in a Muslim society for two reasons. First, such a system is in accordance with the spirit of Islam, which is tolerant of diversity as suggested by the Prophet Mohamed’s statement, “[d]ifference of opinion within my community is a sign of God’s mercy.” Secondly, Islam has few or no specific prescriptions regarding the political institutional arrangements of an Islamic society. Thus, in the absence of any specific rules, except for the institution of shura regarding political matters, this first group of Islamic liberals argue, Muslims are free to adopt democratic political arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

However, the second branch of Islamic liberalism aims at justifying liberal democratic arrangements through specific references to Islam. Those who employ this line of justification refer to “explicit legislation such as the qur’anic provision for taking counsel, or the denial of the sovereign authority of man over man, or the

*shar'i provisions for 'electing' the caliph, or the hadith concerning the equality of believers*" (Binder 1988: 244). In the words of one of the representatives of this second approach, "[l]iberal Islam is a branch, or school, of Islam that emphasizes human liberty and freedom within Islam" (Masmoudi 2003: 40). Hence, one of their starting points is one of the basic teachings of Islam: "there can be no compulsion in religion." The main pillars of this second version of Islamic liberalism are: *Hurriya* (liberty), *Adl* (justice), *Shura* (consultation), and *Ijtihad* (rational interpretation) (Masmoudi 2003: 40-1).

As examples of this approach, we can refer to Abdul Karim Soroush, a Shi'ite Muslim and a Persian from Iran and Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannaouchi, a Sunni Muslim and a Tunisian Arab. As Wright indicates, these reformers aim to modernize and democratize economic and political systems in an Islamic context. They believe that "*human understanding of Islam is flexible, and that Islam's tenets can be interpreted to accommodate and even encourage pluralism.*" (Wright 1996: 67)

Unlike Maududi or Qutb, Soroush (1995) thinks that there is no incompatibility between Islam and the freedoms that are the basis of democracy: "*Islam and democracy are not only compatible, their association is inevitable. In a Muslim society, one without the other is not perfect*" (in Wright 1996: 68). Soroush's advocacy of democracy for the Islamic world depends on two pillars: First, Soroush (2000: 140-141) believes that,

*"[f]aith is a matter of exclusively personal and private experience. We embrace a faith individually just as we confront our death individually. ...*

*Faith and love are of the same grain. ... There is no such thing as collective adoration, love, and testimony, just as there is no such thing as forced adoration, love, and testimony. True faith is contingent upon individuality and liberty."*

As Wright (1996: 68) rightly suggests, "*This freedom is the basis of democracy.*" Furthermore, for Soroush, the ideal Islamic state must be based on the beliefs and the will of the majority: An Islamic democracy cannot be dictated from the top; it would not be legitimate unless it has been chosen by the majority, including nonbelievers as well as believers (Wright 1996: 68). In this respect, for Soroush (2000: 129), observing the freedoms and rights that are the bases of democracy makes a government not only democratic, but also religious, i.e. Islamic. Secondly, according to Soroush, our understanding of religion has not reached a point where it is fixed and immutable. Rather it is evolving. Although the sacred texts are immutable, their interpretation is always subject to change because understanding is influenced by the time and place in which believers live (Wright 1996: 68-70).

Ghannouchi (1995) defends an Islamic system with majority rule, free elections, a free press, protection of minorities, equality of all secular and religious parties, and full women's rights. In this respect, Islam's function is limited to provide the system with moral values (Wright 1996:73). According to Gannouchi, individual believers are entitled to interpret the Koran for themselves— the right of *ijtihad*. In Islam there is no one particular authority with the exclusive right of interpretation of the Koran. Also, decisions in an Islamic society must be based on the views of majority and this is secured through the process of *shura*. In his own words,

*“While on the one hand Islam recognizes the right of its adherents to ijtihad in interpreting the Koranic text, it does not recognize a church or an institution or a person as a sole authority speaking in its name or claiming to represent it. Decision making, through the process of shura, belongs to the community as a whole. Thus the democratic values of political pluralism and tolerance are perfectly compatible with Islam.”* (in Wright 1996: 72)

Liberal Islam in general makes a distinction between the core of the religion and the historical baggage that has been built up around it over the centuries. As Lewis (1996: 54) points out, when we speak about Islam as a religion, significant distinctions must be drawn: *“First, there is what Muslims themselves would call the original, pristine, pure Islam of the Koran and the hadith (the traditions of the Prophet Mohamed) ... Second, there is the Islam of the doctors of the holy law, of the magnificent intellectual structure of classical Islamic jurisprudence and theology.”* Liberal Muslims tend to base their thinking rather on the original, pristine, pure Islam of the Koran and *hadith*. As Kubba (2003: 46) puts it “[w]hile there are profound sources of Islamic inspiration beyond the Koran- . . .-Islamic authority is the Koran's alone.”

Regarding the status of the holy law, i.e. *shari'a*, these liberal Muslims think that we need not be bound by the tradition that is obstructive of development and modernization in the way of democratization. As Lewis (1996: 56) puts it *“Muslims believe the holy law to be divinely inspired and guided, yet there are four significantly different school of thought regarding this law.”* Given that the authority from which these different traditions are deriving their approaches is one and the same, namely, the Koran, the plurality of these interpretations can be attributed to a great extent to differences of places and times in which these traditions have been developed. Thus, *shari'a* is, to a great extent, historical. In fact, in order to account for differences in law that were caused by personal interpretation and preferences as well as different social and historical conditions, the doctrine

of diversity (*ikhtilaf*) was developed (Esposito 1998: 321). Kubba (2003: 48-49) draws our attention to this point by stating,

*“Take, for example, the role of women—or to be more precise the segregation of men and women that has been practiced so ubiquitously throughout Muslim history. There is no justification at all for this in our religion’s original message. It has come from extra-Islamic cultural sources, been transposed into an Islamic idiom, and labeled with the name of Islam. Again, if we refer to the Koran, I can have one copy and nobody worldwide will disagree with what that copy says. But if we refer to shari’a law there is no holy book called Shari’a.”*

In this respect, Muslims should not feel obliged to follow those traditions that hinder them from adapting to both coping with difficulties and ceasing the opportunities of the modern world. Unfortunately, there is not much in the past experiences of Islamic societies that Muslims today can benefit from in this quest. Likewise, as Kubba (2000: 90) points out, “[t]he original texts that define Islam provide general principles on governance and the penal code but do not provide laws for modern societies and states.” It is up to individuals in their roles as citizens to form these rules in a modern world. For example, “[t]hinking about the Medina of old helps us to grasp the political concepts and principles at work during the seedtime of Islam, but in no way can that bygone city provide-nor was it ever meant to provide-a method of running the complex cities, states, and societies in which we live today” (Kubba 2003: 49). Democracy provides the Muslim world with a profound way of running its political affairs. However, in the face of traditions that run against democracy, Muslims should be ready to make necessary changes in these traditions by modernizing them, adapting them, stretching them with a spirit of liberty (Kubba 2003).

On the empirical front, the first evidence for the compatibility of Islam and democracy is the existence of democracy in countries with Muslim majority populations. As indicated at the beginning of this article with a reference to Karatnycky (2002: 103), in the 47 countries with an Islamic majority, there are 11 (23 percent) countries that have democratically elected governments. Though it is troubled in some respects, Turkey’s experience with democracy can be an example of this phenomenon. In Turkey, the political power was transferred to an opposition party (Democrat Party) as a result of democratic elections for the first time on 14 May 1950. Since then, Turkey has witnessed three military interventions in 1960, in 1971 and in 1980. However, direct military rule has been an exception rather than the rule in Turkish politics since 1950.

However, there may be those who argue against this by stating that democracy took root in Turkey only after Islam was excluded from the public



realm. For example, this line of thought can be found in Sanford Lakoff (2004: 134-135):

*“...it is misleading to identify Turkey simply as a ‘Muslim-majority country’ if the aim is to show that Islamic belief is compatible with democracy. Turkey’s republican constitution was adopted as part of a secularist revolution in the early 1920s that decreed an end to the traditional religiopolitical offices of sultan and caliph, along with religious courts and schools. Since then, Islamist parties have found themselves forcibly suppressed or compelled to respect secularism. Surely the more relevant implication of the Turkish experience is that Islamic beliefs may have to be overridden or be denied embodiment in social and political institutions if democracy is to rise in Muslim-majority countries . . .”*

Luckily, we do not need to accept Lakoff’s idea readily. Accordingly, Turkey’s experience with democracy did not start with the establishment of the Republic but goes back to Ottoman Empire. First, between December 1876-February 1878, and second, between July 1908-January 1913, Turkey experienced a constitutional parliamentary regime (Zurcher 1997; Erdoğan 1999a: 31). Thus, it was possible to introduce democracy in Turkey even before the secularist revolution of the early 1920s.

Additional empirical evidence in favor of the argument that Islam is not an obstacle to democracy can be found in the emergence of what Vali Nasr (2005: 12) calls “*in a conscience evocation of the political tradition associated with the Christian Democratic parties of Europe-‘Muslim Democracy’*”. To the extent that Muslim democracy does not rest on “*an abstract, carefully thought-out theological and ideological accommodation between Islam and democracy*”, the Muslim democrats reconcile themselves with the requisites of democracy in a pragmatic way (Nasr 2005: 15). This trend has been evident since the early 1990 s in the countries such as Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia where Islamic-oriented but not Islamist parties have had electoral successes. The Justice and Development Party in Turkey, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in Bangladesh, and the United Malays National Organization in Malaysia are examples of this phenomenon.

A peculiar fact about the democratically elected governments in the Muslim world is that none of them exists in the Arab world. As Karatnycky (2002: 104) stated: “*Of the 31 non-Arab Islamic countries, 11 are electoral democracies, while none of the 16 majority-Arab countries has a democratically elected government.*” In parallel to Karatnycky, Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson (2004: 141) show that

"[a] non-Arab Muslim majority country was almost twenty times more likely to be 'electorally competitive' than an Arab Muslim majority country." They reached this conclusion by analyzing the data covering the period between 1973 and 2002 from the standpoint of the presence of electoral competitiveness<sup>4</sup>. These findings bring up the following question: "Can it be possible that the lack of democracy is not related with being a Muslim state, but rather with being an Arab state?" Indeed, Stepan and Robertson titled their 2003 article "An Arab More Than 'Muslim' Electoral Gap" and 2004 article "Arab, Not Muslim, Exceptionalism".

This peculiar fact makes one think that in addition to the pessimistic interpretation of Islam, which rejects democracy, socio-economic, international, and cultural factors, which are not directly related with Islam, might be responsible for the lack of democracy in the Arab world. To the extent that other Muslim countries that lack democratically elected governments also share some of these factors, the Arab experience may be worth to considering more closely. With this idea in mind, let us now examine the Arab exceptionalism.

### **Explaining The Arab Exceptionalism**

Various explanations can be offered for this empirical discrepancy of democratic credentials in the Arab world. One line of explanation is concerned with socio-economic development. In fact, most of the Muslim majority countries are in less developed parts of the world. As a part of this larger Muslim world, many Arab countries have a bad record of socio-economic development. Going back to Seymour Martin Lipset's 1959 article, "*Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*", it can be argued that in most of the Arab countries the level of socio economic development is not high enough to sustain a democratic form of government. As will be remembered, Lipset argued that socio-economic development, i.e. modernization, creates a middle class that is at peace with the main institutions of the political system. Furthermore, modernization makes the working class less authoritarian by giving it a stake in the system such as a stable income and the hope of climbing the ladder of social standing. Thus, he concluded that although socio-economic development does not guarantee democratic government, it helps sustain it.

Indeed, as Kubba (2000) indicates, after they gained their independence from the Ottoman Empire with the help of European colonialists, Arab states experimented with democracy for the first time in their history. At that time, governments followed constitutional and legal procedures but failed to address the needs of the worse off sections in their societies. Despite the fact that a political system that is open to all citizens existed, high illiteracy rates hindered masses from taking part in politics. A combination of this lack of

participation and the slow pace of social and economic development caused democracy to remain an urban phenomenon that mostly served the interests of the elite and thus to lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the poor.

The events that took place in the aftermath of World War II gave a further impetus to the collapse of democracy in the Arab world. First, the establishment of the state of Israel had caused nationalism and political radicalism to rise. Second, competing superpowers did not care about democracy rather about their vital interests in the region and thus gave a blank check to the military officers. Confident with the encouragement given by the competing superpowers, military officers benefited from this climate of low legitimacy of democratic government and rampant nationalism, and put an end to democratic governments. Thus, bureaucratic-authoritarian governments were introduced first into Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, and then to most of the Arab world through popularly supported military coups (Kubba 2000: 85-86).

At this point, one can think of economically well-to-do Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf sheikhdoms. Despite the fact that they are doing very well economically these states have not experienced any democratic government. What explains this? As pointed out above, Lipset did not argue that social and economic development lead to political democracy. Likewise, Phillips Cutright and James Wiley (1969) can give us theoretical insight about this puzzle. In their study covering 40 nations within the time period from 1927 to 1966, Cutright and Wiley confirmed the positive correlation between economic development and democracy that was advanced by Lipset earlier. The originality of their study was the finding that those countries with a high level of economic development and high social security services could continue without democracy if they wanted to. In other words, as long as the state could satisfy the economic demands of the citizens such as jobs, health care, housing, etc., citizens did not feel a strong need to have a say in decision making. Thus when one thinks about the fact that oil-rich countries of the Arab peninsula provide most of these services and plus do not need taxes to finance them, then, the proverb '*No taxation, no representation*' makes clear sense. As Karatnycky (2002: 105) indicates "*oil-rich Muslim states have used oil revenues to provide large subventions to their populations, creating a unique form of public welfare that reinforces idleness and suppresses initiative.*"

A second negative impact of the riches that are generated through oil on democratization among the Arab states is that it prevents the emergence of entrepreneurial and working classes respectively. As shown by numerous scholars such as Barrington Moore (1993) and Rueschemeyer et al. (1992), the emergence of democracy depends on the existence of social classes that demand it. Stated differently, the Arab states that are rich achieved prosperity without capitalist development. Additionally, the lack of a vibrant market economy causes the

absence of a lively civil society. The simple reason for this is that in the absence of a developed market economy, civil society groups cannot gain easily economic independence from the state. Where the main income source for individuals and groups is the state, the state can be criticized only to the extent that it allows.

Another factor that is related to the collapse of democracy and the entrenchment of authoritarian governments in the Arab world is concerned with cultural dimension. The crux of the argument that sees a direct relationship between a given country's culture and its democratic prospects is that in order for democracy to work properly in a given society, there must be a cultural background that is suitable for democracy in that particular country. Thus, in *The Civic Culture*, 1963, Almond and Verba argue that a political culture with a mixture of both participative and deferential components would have a more suitable climate for democracy (in Peters 1998: 45). In contrast, solely participative or subject-oriented cultures would be less suitable for democracy. However, as Kubba (2000: 86) points out, “[p]atriarchal Arab societies, accustomed to strong chiefs, had little appreciation for the slow process and competing authorities of democratic rule.” Using Almond and Verba's classification, we can conclude that when democracy collapsed in the Arab world, Arab societies had a rather subject-oriented political culture<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the social-economic and cultural factors, a third factor has its roots outside the region, i.e., in the capitals of the major powers of the world. As suggested with reference to the emergence of bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes in the aftermath of World War II, the superpowers openly supported military officers in staging military coups in the Arab countries. During and even after the Cold War those major powers continued to support authoritarian regimes for the sake of maintaining stability in the region that is indispensable for their national interests. Thus, Radwan Masmoudi (2003: 43) states that, “*the United States and European countries must stop supporting the dictators in the name of stability. We all know that the stability provided by dictators is an illusion that only breeds violence and extremism.*” Indeed, the unfolding of events following September 11, 2001 caused the only superpower of the world to change its policy towards the Middle East. Accordingly, the US government and its main ally, the UK, embarked on a project called *Greater Middle East Initiative*, the primary purpose of which is to promote democracy in the region.

In conjunction with the factor of stability, authoritarian regimes of the Arab world have been playing the card of Islamic fundamentalism and terror, especially since the end of the Cold War. These regimes have used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as a justification for their heavy-handed rule in the eye of the international community. They argue that if they loosen the harnesses a little bit, the Islamists will take the power and this, in turn, will

destroy the stability and peace in the region (Kubba 2000: 89; El-Affendi 2003: 37). One of the instruments that these regimes have employed in justifying their undemocratic measures has been the press. As Kubba (2000: 89) reports, “[t]he official press gives maximum publicity to radical and violent groups, portraying political Islam as a bogeyman that justifies undemocratic measures ...” Thanks to this manipulated propaganda, these regimes were able to lump all Islamic groups in the category of fundamentalist Islam and to exclude them from social and political participation (Kubba 2000; Masmoudi 2003). As Masmoudi (2003: 42) points out, “these states often do not distinguish between the liberal and fundamentalist Islam, they tend to perceive religion itself as a threat.”

Thus, in combination with a pessimistic interpretation of the relationship between Islam and democracy, there are factors that can be grouped as social and economic, cultural, and international factors that can be employed to explain the lack of democratic government in the Arab world. Of course, there may be some other factors that have not been accounted for in this limited space, yet none that have been discussed here are related to the essence of Islam. Stated differently, these are all secular, temporal factors<sup>6</sup>.

In this respect, they are not immutable. In fact, a long way has been traveled in the direction of modernization in the past few decades in the Arab world. There has been important progress in social, economic, and educational fronts (Kubba 2000: 88). Hence, it would not be misleading to conclude that Arab countries are overcoming all the barriers that stand in the way of democratization one by one. It can be reasonably expected that in the near future, transitions to democracy will be achieved in this part of the world as well.

## **Conclusion**

This article raised one particular question: Is Islam an obstacle to democratization in the Muslim world? At the very beginning, it was pointed out that there are those who think that Islam rejects democracy with its notion of popular sovereignty. For them, the sovereignty belongs to God. Therefore, one can think, the lack of democracy in the Islamic world can be explained by the absence of any notion of democratic government in Islam. However, this pessimistic view for the fortunes of democracy in the Muslim world does not go unchallenged. It is possible to advance both empirical evidence that there are democratic countries with majority-Muslim populations and theoretical arguments that Islam and democracy are not only compatible, but their association is inevitable. The optimistic view about the compatibility of Islam and democracy makes a distinction between the core of the religion and historical baggage that has been built around it over the centuries. On the basis of this distinction, it claims that those who argue against democracy in the name of Islam are depending on the historical baggage rather

than the core of Islam. There is nothing in the core of Islam that hinders the establishment of democracy.

In fact, as it was shown in explaining the lack of democracy in the Arab world, in combination with a pessimistic interpretation of the relationship between Islam and democracy, social, economic and cultural factors that are not related to Islam can be identified as the factors that hinder the development of democracy. However, this also shows that in order to establish democracy in the Muslim world, it is not enough to show that Islam is compatible with democracy, rather, there must be a social, economic, and cultural environment that is fit for democracy. In this direction, if democracy is going to take root in Islamic soil, both the interpretation that emphasizes the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and the social, economic, and cultural conditions must be advanced.

### **Notes**

1. As a matter of fact, the issue of the sovereignty in Islam is a disputed matter. In opposition to the Islamist view that vests all sovereignty in God, there is also the argument that makes a distinction between two sorts of sovereignty: ontological and temporal. According to this distinction, although God is the creator of the universe and thus ontologically sovereign over all of it, God is not in charge of the political affairs directly. That is to say, God did not spell out the political rules specifically by which human beings will order their relationships in this world. Thus, political sovereignty is left to human beings (Erdoğan 1999b: 33-34).
2. Even Maududi himself accepts the fact that the Islamic state he defends resembles the Fascist and Communist states in this respect. However, he believes that even though the Islamic state is an all-inclusive state, it is completely different from the modern totalitarian and authoritarian states (Maududi 1985: 30). For Maududi, what makes Islamic totalitarianism a good form of totalitarianism, and totally different from the modern totalitarianisms, is the fact that it is based on God's orders (Esposito 1998: 153).
3. Along the same lines, see also ÇAHA, Ö. (2003), "Islam and Democracy: A Theoretical Discussion on the Compatibility of Islam and Democracy," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 2, (3-4): 106-134.
4. It must be noted that Stepan and Robertson do not equate 'electoral competitiveness' with democracy as such. They are of the opinion that 'electoral competitiveness' is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy to take root in a country. They think that competitiveness is present when "1) the government springs from reasonably fair elections; and 2) the elected government –and not some other power center- is able to fill the most important political offices." (2004: 141)
5. Yet, it must be noted that, by stating that, "[t]hroughout history, the overwhelmingly most common type of regime in the Islamic world has been autocracy-which is not to be confused with despotism. The dominant political tradition has long been that of command and obedience, and far from weakening it, modern times have actually witnessed its intensification." Bernard Lewis thinks that this is true not only for the Arab world but for the Islamic world in general (Lewis 1996: 54-55).

6. It can be argued that at least cultural factors may be directly linked with the religion. However, to this argument it can be responded by stating that the cultural feature that is pointed in this paper with regards to the Arab exceptionalism, namely, tribalism and its associated behavioral attitudes within the Arab world were there even before the emergence of Islam.

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# "İslam, Müslüman Dünyada Demokratikleşmenin Önünde Bir Engel midir İslam ve Demokrasinin Uyumu Tartışmasının Yeniden Gözden Geçirilmesi"

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**Özet:** Bu makalenin amacı, İslam ve demokrasinin uyumluluğu hakkındaki argümanların eleştirel bir sunumunu yapmak ve İslam'ın Müslüman dünyada kurumsallaşmış demokrasilere ulaşmanın önünde bir engel olup olmadığını tartışmaktır. Bu doğrultuda ilk olarak, İslam ile demokrasinin uyumsuzluğunu ileri sürenlerin argümanları ortaya konulmaktadır. İkinci olarak, İslam ile demokrasinin uyumlu olduğuna işaret eden ampirik ve teorik argümanlara yer verilmektedir. Makalenin Sonuç kısmında, ampirik ve teorik argümanların işaret ettiği üzere, İslam'ın demokrasinin Müslüman dünyada kök salmasının önünde bir engel teşkil etmediği vurgulanmakta, ve fakat, demokrasinin ortaya çıkıp yerleşmesi için tek başına bu uyumluluğun yeterli olamayacağına da dikkat çekilmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, yapılması gerekenin, bir taraftan İslam'ın demokrasiyle uyumlu yorumları güçlendirilirken, diğer taraftan da sosyo-ekonomik, kurumsal ve uluslararası alanlarda demokrasinin önünde varolan engellerin kaldırılması doğrultusunda çaba sarfedilmesi olduğu ifade edilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İslam, demokrasi, liberal İslam, sosyo-ekonomik gelişme, kültür

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## Действительно ли ислам - препятствие демократизации в мусульманском мире? Дебаты совместимости Ислама и повторно посещенной демократии

Доктор Биджан Шахин\*

**Резюме:** Целью данной статьи является критика аргументов по поводу согласия Ислама и демократии, а также ведется дискуссия о том является ли Ислам в Мусульманском мире препятствием на пути к общественной демократии. В этом направлении на первый план выносятся аргументы, говорящие о несовместимости Ислама и Демократии. Во-вторых выделяется отдельное место эмпирическим и теоретическим аргументам, указывающим на совместимость Ислама и демократии. В итоговой части статьи, как и указывают эмпирические и теоретические аргументы, подчёркивается то что Ислам не является препятствием на пути внедрения демократии в Мусульманском мире и в то же время привлекают внимание к тому, что для внедрения демократии одной совместимости недостаточно. Также указывается, что с одной стороны усиливая обзор совместимости Ислама с демократией, с другой стороны в этом направлении необходимо потратить усилия для снятия препятствий, стоящих перед демократией в социо-экономической, общественной и международной сфере.

**Ключевые слова:** Ислам, демократия, либеральный Ислам, социо-культурное развитие, культура

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